The Lecter Estate

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The Lecter Estate

by Bitchmysaladispeople

Summary

A pointed canine glints in the morning light when Lecter smiles, thinking of his future. Perhaps it is time to start believing in things like ghosts. After all, if you see that glint, you're destined to become one.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Prologue

In a removed corner of a small country, there has sat a castle made of stone and wood, iron and blood. For decades, it has sat, home to both the richest of royalty and the most royally rich. The walls of it have seen generations upon generation of families, of marriage beds and toddling children. It has seen carnage, and war, and the nature of man at its very worst. The halls of the Lecter Estate have been walked by some of the finest men in Lithuania. As the years wore on it, however, desolation became it, and dust collected in crumbling stone.

During a frigid winter, a young boy left the estate with everything he was soon to lose. Lifetimes later, he returned, a grown man with a blackened soul warped by time. The Lecter boy, who had known the very worst of the world, had grown. He was ghostly pale and maintained very white teeth, the owner sanguine eyes which pointedly reassured any onlookers of his unsavory intentions.

Just inside the overgrown yard of the estate, he paused, looking over the remains of his childhood home. He knew, then. His days of wandering were done, or paused, at the very least. The castle was to be a home once again, and the halls would see things that they had never seen before. Surely, if the stone could speak, it would've been screaming bloody murder. However, for all that it has seen, the estate cannot speak, and remained quiet, as it does to this day. There is a sense about them now, however, a tangible feeling of wrong which could likely be attributed to ghosts. That is, of course, if you believe in things like ghosts.

A pointed canine glints in the morning light when Lecter smiles, thinking of his future. Perhaps it is time to start believing in things like ghosts. After all, if you see that glint, you're destined to become one.

Sage

Chapter Summary

> Wisdom, immortality, purity.
>
> In some circles, sage is thought to ward off evil spirits. Drinking sage tea is thought to grant you wisdom and health. In some cultures, 'health' was merely an understatement, and they sought eternal life within its leaves.

Will stared down at his hands, thinking not for the first time that they didn't really reflect his lifestyle. One would expect that a 'strapping young lad' enlisted into outdoor work would have more than a few callouses to show for his efforts. Days spent landscaping should have given him stocky fingers, knuckles tanned and hairy, hands that looked formidable rather than suited to playing the piano. Indeed, that was a comment he received often, mostly from nosy spectators and schoolteachers who were transfixed by the way he held a pencil. He occasionally wondered what strangulation marks his hands would make, strong as they were, considering their more delicate appearance. Those thoughts were usually chased by internal arguing and alcohol, though, so it was better not to wonder too long.

"Will," an accented voice injected itself into his thoughts, and he glanced up, meeting the concerned gaze of the woman who'd interviewed him just a few days prior. Mrs. Astrauskas was a thin creature, with wide eyes and worn smile lines. He got the sense that when she was young, when wrinkled skin was tight and unmarred, she was rather lovely. The battered wedding ring on the fourth finger of her left hand attested to her ability to find a partner, anyway. As he snapped from his reverie, she gave him a kind smile, clasping her hands in front of herself.

"Yes, Ma'am?"

Her smile widened as the words rolled off of his tongue, and she gestured for him to stand up. "I'll show you to your room, and then show you where you'll be working?"

He nodded in response, and she turned, implicitly asking him to follow her. He made no complaints, adjusting his duffle bag over his shoulder and entering the estate. He'd found it rather funny, actually, that he was really going to be working in a place where the help came in through the back. Then again, the front door was so ostentatious he actually preferred the back entrance.

Mrs. Astrauskas led him through what he presumed to be the bowels of the estate--busy workers dressed in some type of general uniform were bustling about, moving to and fro down either side of narrow hallways. They took multiple turns, and Will felt a slight roll of anxiety at the prospect of getting lost on a daily basis. She assured him, though, as they

turned into a corridor lined with doors and the traffic decreased significantly, that he'd take to it quickly. Soon, he'd know the manor like the back of his hand. He didn't really like that idea, either, but kept that to himself.

She took him to the very end of the 'Servant's Quarters', as she unabashedly labeled it, and gestured to the second to the last door. "Your room. Bathroom for the gentlemen is just to the left--you can just set your things inside."

He sort of liked Mrs. Astrauskas--she seemed to be to the point, but not rudely so. No coddling, no soft padding around her words, simple statements and requests phrased without too much pomp. He wished more people were like her, less nosy, more purposeful.

His room was tiny, but he hadn't expected much different. A narrow twin bed, a small wardrobe, and a tiny stand for a basin and pitcher that looked pinched straight from the 1800's. He set his bag at the foot of the bed before exiting, and Mrs. Astrauskas was off once again.

The busy hallways made his head hurt, and passing by the noisy kitchen garnered a particularly sharp throb behind his eyes. The whole reason he'd started doing landscaping was because, in addition to being easier, it kept his mind occupied with limited interference. It had been made clear to him that the outdoor staff was rather small--he'd be an addition to a team of two men in charge of keeping the estate together. One of the pre-existing employees took care of maintenance, and the other was in charge of maintaining water features, gardening, and heading up irrigation. Will could hardly hand a picture, and the thought of being wrist deep in the mechanics for the fountain in the front yard made him uneasy, so the fact that he'd be in charge of beautification and the upkeep of aesthetics was hardly bad news. Presently, as he'd noted, things were looking a little overgrown. He could fix that easily.

"You'll be in charge of your own hours--unless you don't measure up to the Count's standards. I'd recommend you do work at least eight hours a day, but feel free to finish quicker." Mrs. Astrauskas explained, while leading him outside. It was blissfully quiet and cool out, the sky cloudy and overcast. Will figured he could knock out the weeds around the pathways he spotted in the back garden, and perhaps start trimming the shrubbery around the front and back entrances. She didn't introduce him to his 'co-workers', nor did she try to do any superfluous explaining. She deposited him by the gardening shed and left him with the information that dinner was at seven at night, breakfast was at six in the morning, and lunch was anywhere from twelve to two. If he did his job well, he'd have it for years to come. The notion of such permanence disoriented Will, who immediately went looking through the shed for gloves and tools, all too happy to start.

Working on the Lecter Estate was, in all actuality, the best job that Will had ever had. He was undisturbed, unbothered, and allowed to do as much work as he saw fit. Within two weeks, he'd completely resolved the overgrown issues, from the paths in the backyard to the flora in the front. Things were looking better than they ever had been, apparently, if the word of the chef was to be trusted. Seeing as he still had a job, Will thought the Count likely agreed with this conclusion. There was no way to know for sure, however, seeing as he'd never even *seen* the guy, let alone gotten a performance review from him.

Another benefit to working on the estate was that nobody cared to familiarize with him. The workers were mostly older, and though they didn't seem to *dislike* him, they already had their connections and didn't need a twenty-something hanger-on. In turn, Will already had years of antisocial behavior and a propensity for being alone behind him, and didn't need dead weight hanging around his neck and unintentionally passing their problems off to him.

He'd fallen into a routine, dawning his days at nearly seven, making his way out to work by eight, and doing so until an hour or so before dinner. He'd collect his food and eat out back, enjoying solitude as much as he enjoyed the evening air. Then, he'd wait until everyone had finished in the bathroom, take a shower, and go to bed. It wasn't ideal--hell, it wasn't even *pleasant,* but it was working for him. But, seeing as Will was capable of catching almost anything but a break, everything stopped working.

He was in the middle of picking the dead leaves off of a Hepatica plant, when a maid he'd never seen before approached. He saw her from a distance and sat back on his heels, watching her compulsively grasp and release the skirt of her dress. He held his hand up to block the sun as she approached.

"Mr. Graham?" She asked, voice hesitant and strung with anxiety.

Oh, god. "Yeah?"

"The--you have a guest, asking for you."

Shit. "A guest?"

"The Count is entertaining him in the study. He requested that you clean up and join them."

"The guest?"

"The count."

That explained her anxiety, he supposed. A direct order from her boss, and she was a young little thing, asked to go speak to the shut-in gardener who never spoke a word to anybody. He thanked her, tersely, for letting him know, and grit his teeth as she made herself scarce. He knew, without a doubt, that it was Jack Crawford who'd come knocking.

Tarragon

Chapter Summary

> It isn't widely known, but Tarragon is sometimes thought to convey lasting interest. More importantly, though, it is one of the four fines herbes of French cooking--well suited to chicken, fish, and egg dishes.
>
> James Andrew Beard, an American cookbook author and television presence, was once quoted as saying; "I believe that if ever I had to practice cannibalism, I might manage if there were enough tarragon around."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Loud and bustling though they were, Will vastly preferred the halls the servants ran through to the opulent corridors of the rest of the estate.

It was a scene pinched from a century long past, the candelabras extinguished, leaving spots dark and dim where the light streaming through the windows couldn't quite reach. Indulgent paintings lined the walls, which were otherwise covered by outdated wallpaper that didn't belong anywhere else. He felt the crushing need to remove his boots, though he'd wiped them clean compulsively before even daring to cross beyond the veil of the servant's domain. It was too bad he wasn't too preoccupied to turn his nose up at the fact that anyone had a *study* these days--let alone refer to it as such. The only thing he imagined Lecter studying was his money, or something equally pretentious but a bit more thinly-veiled. Either way, his stomach coiled into a complete knot the second he stopped in front of the door, and he pulled a face before knocking, pushing away all hesitation. Briefly, he entertained the idea of a macabre voice droning, instructing him to 'Enter', and doing so to find a large mahogany desk serving as a prop for a chair turned away from the door. It would spin, revealing Jack Crawford, stroking a Persian cat, having obtained an eye patch in the months since Will had last seen him.

His fantasy was interrupted, unfortunately, when the door opened.

After the first few days passed, Will expected--hoped--to never have to see the Count, and as such, he'd concocted an image of him to settle any wavering curiosity. In Will's mind, Count Lecter was a gray old man who looked fading, close to keeling over, who cared only for opera glasses and petunias and mocking the peasants in the lower zoo. Depending on how you looked at the world, it was either fortunate, unfortunate, or just plain interesting that he was actually an attractive man who couldn't have been older than forty-five, smiling patiently and welcomingly. Will considered it unfortunate and stared at the man's shoes after his initial scan.

"Mr. Graham," he greeted, words rolling off of his tongue in the best demonstration of the Lithuanian accent Will had been blessed enough to hear. "A pleasure to meet you, at last."

His tone didn't betray any duality, and that bothered Will, who nodded, and was suddenly glad the Count had addressed him in perfect English. He didn't want to stumble through a native language the Count most definitely excelled at, not when the man had such *shiny* shoes.

"Will." Jack Crawford's voice made him grit his teeth, and the Count stepped aside, allowing the grimy gardener to enter properly. Jack was sitting patiently, though agitation radiated off of him, with a full cup of tea beside him. He was so angry that he clearly couldn't even be a good guest. "You've been running for a while now."

"Tracking me down to my place of work, Jack? I thought you knew how to pick up on subtlety. How many countries are you going to run me out of?"

"As many as it takes, dammit," Crawford ground out, and Will closed his eyes for a minute, trying to compose himself.

Jack Crawford was a man of great integrity. He stood by his wife, he stood by his job, he stood by his promise to take Will and suck the life out of him until there was nothing left, and he stood by the idea that the only way it could end was with him dropping Will's lifeless husk into a mental hospital. That didn't sit quite right with him, not at all, but he'd tried to help the troubled teacher. He'd even tried leaving him alone, but the fact was, the bodies were piling up. And in the time it took the average detective, no matter how skilled, to figure out a case, the pile only got higher. Will had the brightest mind he'd ever seen, and he was willing to use it all up to save lives. For a while, Will had been, too. All it took, though, was one particularly rough case, and Jack was left with an open window in a hotel room and not so much as a note.

"I'm here to take you home, Will," Crawford explained, as though it hadn't been perfectly obvious.

"Home?" It came out bitter, and there was nothing Will could do to stop the sardonic chuckle from escaping his throat. "Home, Jack, or to another crime scene?"

"Home, first. Then to another crime scene. Listen to me--The Minnesota Shrike is active again, we need--"

"Can you even comprehend how inappropriate this is?" Will demanded, putting his hands on his hips and staring out the window behind Crawford's head."

"I know exactly how inappropriate this is, and yet here I am, doing it anyway. This just goes to show you how necessary you are, Will, please, just stop this. You're going to come back one way or the other, but the longer you take, the more people have to die." He glanced over at the Count. "You agree with me, don't you, Doctor Lecter?"

Will's eyes widened, and he turned to his employer, who was playing Switzerland, leaning on his desk. "To be fair, agent Crawford, I don't feel as though I have enough information to

weigh in on the situation."
"Enough infor--he can *catch* serial killers, in a way that nobody else can."
"There's always somebody else," he argued, and Jack stood, frustration manifesting itself to the tight vein in the man's neck. Will had seen it pulsing on his forehead, before, but the neck wasn't exactly a good place to see it either.

"Not in this case. He...he gets inside their heads. I don't know how he does it, but who better to catch a killer than someone who can visualize exactly the *why* and the *how,* and take us straight to the *who*? If you had that gift, would you waste it...gardening?!"

The Count considered, for a moment, head tilting slightly as he pondered the question. Will took the opportunity to move his eyes up over a plaid suit, barely containing a snort when he saw a paisley tie. What an obnoxious combo.

"I would like to think that we would all try to help in any way we could," Lecter explained, each word slow and purposeful. "But I don't believe Mr. Graham is running for absolutely no reason." He looked at Will, who momentarily made eye contact, and nearly stumbled back.

He avoided eyes, eyes were distracting. Eyes were swirling whirlpools of transparency, problems and emotions that he saw so clearly he absorbed them easier. 'Doctor Lecter''s eyes were calm. A small black ship, floating peacefully in a sanguine sea, and the eye of a hurricane was brought to Will's mind. He tore away the contact, however, and the Count seemed to file this away for later, as Will's gaze found its place firmly between the older man's eyes. "You visualize the deaths? Front seat to a rather gruesome show?"

"I don't..." he began, only to have his voice break. He cleared his throat to compromise, flexing his hands into fists and then relaxing them again. "I don't watch. I do."

Understanding occurred, and Will watched it happen. Something probably flashed in those worrisome eyes, as lips parted, and a head that had been restored to sitting straight tilted slightly again.

"Rather extraordinary," he commented, and Jack sighed.

"Rather extraordinary, yeah, sure. That's why we need him."

"I imagine that does rather intense damage to one's psyche," the Count murmured, completely ignoring Jack and continuing to address Will. Will, who practically *felt* himself lose his job. "Have you ever spoken to a therapist?"

"I chew therapists up and spit them out on the carpet," Will spat, abandoning his attempts at minding his manners. "And 'damage' is an understatement. Jack, I was losing my mind. How much use am I going to be to anyone when I'm drooling down my chin, suffering the impact of a psychotic break? Or, better yet, buried in the ground with a couple of bullet wounds in my chest? Am I really worth it? Think of all the paperwork, *Jack*."

"I don't want you to lose your mind, Will, I want you to *use* your mind. Think of all the lives you've already saved, all the people you can save in the future. The girls down in Minnesota that you can save *now*."

The guilt rose up his throat like bad indegestion, acrid and sharp, painful, choking him. He was reminded of waking up from terrible nightmares, emptying his empty stomach while images of his hands over mouths and his fingers in eyes played in his head. Memories of things that had never happened--and now, guilt for the things that inevitably would. Not by his hand, but as far as Jack was concerned, it may as well be. He shook his head, and bit his bottom lip, trying to fight the emotions that threatened to overcome him. Threatened to have him in the back of a police cruiser with his brain dripping out one ear, his hand shaking while he tried to hold a gun. His right hand twitched, and he curled it into a fist again to compensate.

It was vaudeville for the Count, who was still leaning on his desk, observing his ant-farm and enjoying it all the while. He wondered if Agent Crawford was going to grasp Will Graham's hair by the root, and pull the curly-haired young man right out of his office, right out of his house, and toss him into a plane headed right back to the states. He wondered if the young man was going to let him.

He hadn't thought much of Graham when hiring him. He was a name on a page a few pen-marks away from a position, nothing more. The grounds were looking better, though, and he didn't hear any complaints, so the man was basically a model employee. Life was very interesting, however, and it proved it another time over when an angry American came knocking on his door, ranting and raving about *needing* to see the new gardener. The new gardener who stood very small up until the point where Crawford riled him up, when his shoulders expanded and he kept moving his hands about, compulsively. It had been mentioned to him that the man was attractive, but that had been an understatement if ever there were.

His forehead and nose-bridge were darker than the rest of his skin, but Lecter saw the milky-white skin peeking at him from underneath the man's collar--he knew better than to trust that tan. A few weeks inside and Will would be pale and unblemished, and it would make those entrancing eyes and that boyish hair stand out all the more. True, Will was probably in his late twenties, entering early thirties, but compared to Lecter, he was nothing more than a boy. A very handsome boy, no doubt, with a finer figure under the layers he wore, but a boy nonetheless.

Attractiveness, however, was not enough to gain the Count's attention for more than a moment. Even in cases where the subject was as attractive as Will was, there had to be *more.* And here Jack Crawford was--serving him *more* on a silver platter. Apparently, the same hands that weeded his gardens and manipulated the earth of his estate were the hands of a million murderers in potential. He wondered just how deep the fantasies ran, and how impactful the aftershocks truly were. Judging by his refusal to make any sort of eye contact, probably very impactful.

"Do you want to know why I ran, Jack?" Will asked, jaw tensed. "Do you *really* want to know?"

"Will--"

"For *once* in my life, self-preservation kicked in, and for once, I chose to cling to my last shred of sanity because I'm no good to anyone when I'm dead." He spat it out all in one

breath and was left with his chest heaving just a bit. Jack was probably the only person who was able to worm underneath Will's skin to such a degree that it manifested physically--well, the only person who didn't also stick their hands inside of other people to tear out their organs. "And if I hadn't left, I would be."

Crawford's jaw ticked, and Will heard the gears in his head as they shifted, trying to conjure a way to glaze over the suicidal admission and hammer home the same points he'd been using to manipulate the empath for years. "Angela Sanders," he said, after a long moment of contemplation. "Fifteen years old. Found on a bed made of her own entrails and blood. Split open at the stomach, body cavity packed with wildflowers and sewn back up. She was *fifteen,* Will. An honor student. Never even had detention, murdered in cold blood. She's dead because you chose to run away, she's dead--"

"It seems as though Miss Sanders is dead because there's a killer on the loose," the Count interjected. "And there will be more like her, dead because instead of investigating the crime yourself, you've wasted your time coming after Mr. Graham." He glanced back at Will, who was looking a little green, eyes wide and unseeing. "I believe you should see yourself out, Agent Crawford."

"Never even had detention?" Will asked, voice coming out broken. "Packed with wildflowers?"

Crawford narrowed his eyes, taking a few steps toward him. "Yeah."

"Was she lovely?" His tone was still fractured and quiet, eyes still unseeing.

"Yes. She was lovely. Innocent, too."

"Semen?"
"We didn't find any. No signs of sexual assault, or--"

"Look again," Will ordered, coming out of his trace. "Look at the flowers."

"Does this mean you're coming back?"

"I--"

"No."

Will narrowed his eyes, and directed his gaze in the Count's direction. Will's answer had somehow come out of the other man's mouth, and he wasn't nearly that good at throwing his voice. The older man simply smiled, a small, polite little twitch of his lips, before looking back at Jack, who was agitated once again.

"I think I should hear the answer from Will. Don't you think, doctor?"

"No," Will clarified, almost automatically. "No, Jack, I'm not coming. And don't come looking."

Crawford sighed, reaching into the pocket of his jacket and producing a business card, taking another step forward and holding it out to Will. "When you *realize* what you *need to do,* Will, you give me a call. Hopefully, there won't be too many bodies waiting for you."

Will glared at the extended card until the Count reached over, plucking it from Crawford's hand.

"Thank you, agent Crawford. Perhaps we'll be in touch."

Crawford tossed him a vicious glare, giving it to Will for a moment before leaving, pulling the heavy door closed with a slam. The second he was gone, something that had been holding Will's shoulders tight released, and he slumped just a bit, reaching up to rub his brow.

"Agent Crawford seems convinced that you're an attractive dish worth breaking," the Count noted, earning a small chuckle. "I'm surprised that he came here."

"I'm not. Surprised that he found me, but not that he came. Jack's a specific breed of man who doesn't care what he wrecks when he's driving to his final destination."

"Tenacity as advanced is really rather rare. You run to the ends of the earth to escape, and he still manages to find you."
"Maybe I've just got a blinking aura," he scoffed, glancing back up at the spot between the Count's eyes. "I shouldn't work here, anymore."

"No, I don't believe that you should. Mr. Graham, would you do me the honor of joining me for dinner, tonight?"

"What? Why--oh. 'Doctor' Lecter. You're a psychiatrist, aren't you?"

"...among other things, yes. There's little correlation between my position and my invitation, however."

"Uh-huh. There never is. Trust, me, doctor, you don't want to decode my thoughts. My thoughts are not often *tasty."*

"I trust you when you tell me that you chew and spit therapists. I have no intention of being your therapist. Indulge me on a personal level, if you would? Be my guest for the evening?"

Will breathed out a laugh and shook his head. "You'll see for yourself, I guess."

"Is that a yes, Mr. Graham?"
"Yes. Call me Will."

"Will." The Count tasted the name on his tongue, smiling again. "Please, then, call me Hannibal."

Will raised a brow, but didn't repeat the name. "Why don't I go get cleaned up before dinner?"

"Absolutely," *Hannibal* agreed. "Thank you, Will."

His reply was a small grunt, and Will left in a slightly less confrontational manner than Jack had. Hannibal was exceptionally pleased, and already running recipes through his mind.

Chapter End Notes

It's about to get good-goddamned interesting, mhm mhm.

Amaranth

Chapter Summary

> Amaranth, or 'Lady Bleeding', is a versatile plant. For thousands of years, all parts of it have been used for consumption, herbal medicine, and decorative purposes. Ancient Greeks adorned their tombs with colorful variations of the plant, which symbolized immortality.

Will didn't bother taking a hell of a lot with him when he slipped through his hotel window--a suitcase of clothes and personal effects, nothing more--and so, of course, he didn't have anything to wear to a fancy dinner in the dining room of a grand estate. The thought passed his mind, as he looked through his closet, and then he scowled at himself for the thought. William Graham didn't fuss over articles of clothing, and if the Count was insulted by what would definitely be an obvious lack of effort, what was the worst he could do? Fire him? No, he'd already done that. Maybe titter to his wealthy friends about the unstable, unkempt, bumbling ex-FBI agent who'd graced his table for an evening--but nothing more. And Will could definitely handle tittering, even at his own expense, especially when he wouldn't be around to hear it. He settled for his old teacher outfit, which he'd been wearing during his daring escape. Crumpled up slacks that were about a half a step up from blue jeans, a wrinkled blue dress shirt that probably came from a parallel dimension, because he couldn't remember for the life of him where it came from, and a scratchy second-hand blazer. In the mirror, he thought that he looked more like Professor Graham than he'd looked in a very long time. He tried to get his hair away from his face, ran a hand over his scruff, and called it good a whole two hours before dinner was even supposed to start.

He took the free time to sit in his room, pack up his things, and mentally plan out his next moves. Either that evening or the following morning--all depending on how terribly he stumbled through the dinner--he would be off again, out a job, out a place to live. Hopefully there would be something. Anything that wasn't working with Jack Crawford was preferable, though, and it's actually easier to find bosses who *aren't* licensed psychiatrists rather than those who are, contrary to Will's apparent luck. It would take patience and tenacity, and he was already too tired to deal with it. All he wanted was his little house, his dogs, and his students, but he'd never have that with Jack Crawford mucking about. If he could hunt him down in Europe, he'd be breathing down his neck in America, no doubt about it.

Mrs. Astrauskas came to fetch him when the time finally came, looking a bit worried. As he followed her, he followed two trains of thought down completely different avenues. The first: he was reminded of his first day working, to his amusement, but almost in reverse, with the journey starting in the servant's quarters and ending in uncertainty. The second: she was probably the Count's--Hannibal's--favorite, unless she was just so good at her job that keeping a wry old woman on staff was worthwhile. Maybe it was both.

"I'm sorry to hear we will need a new gardener," she articulated carefully, inclining her head slightly as she walked instead of turning to look at him. "Your hands are very talented."

"I'm sure you'll find someone even better," he tried to assure, but the words fell flat. She pursed her lips, effectively stunting all further conversation.

Will had never really been through the upper parts of the house, so he took the opportunity to appreciate the decadence of it. Hannibal was a man of taste, and if that taste was obnoxious macabre wealth, Will was too poor to be in any position to judge. Still, though, didn't most people hang bucks on the wall, rather than skeletal heads? Again, too poor to know, but he was a bit unnerved by the nature of the decor. He wondered if the fact that Mrs. Astrauskas wasn't phased was borne of the fact that she appreciated the decor, or because she was used to it.

The dining room door was made of rich cherry, and the sound of her knocking echoed in a way that made him flinch against his will. She didn't wait for a response before pushing it open, entering and just holding it there. It took a minute for him to jumpstart his brain and make his legs walk him through. The hot second he was in, she was out, pulling the door closed, and he turned to stare at the empty space where she'd been. The door didn't make a sound as it closed.

"So glad that you could join me, Will." Hannibal's voice reverberated behind him, and Will turned again, just slightly disoriented. The promise of the door didn't match up to the reality of the dining room. It wasn't an opulent hall, fit to house an army, it was a rather intimate dining room. Still more expensive than any room Will had ever inhabited before, make no mistake, and still oddly yet tastefully decorated, but smaller than expected. The two table heads were set. Hannibal was standing behind the chair furthest away from the door, eyeing him as a predator eyes its prey. Suddenly, he felt very cornered, and it was a fight to force himself to continue inside. If his brain asked if anyone could hear screams through the door and across the hallway, he convinced himself it was because he imagined killing the count rather than the opposite. *Say what you will about Will Graham, but he's an expert at denial.* He ought to of been--he'd been practicing his entire life.

"I try not to miss appointments I purposefully make, on the rare occasion I subject myself to human interaction." Hannibal's lips turned into something that clearly was a smile, but Will regarded as a parody of one, and drew in a bit more tightly on himself. Defensively. Something told him that the man was dangerous, and had to be handled as such.

"I'll do my best to keep it from being too draining," Hannibal vowed, without an ounce of sincerity, "please, take a seat. I'll bring out the first course."

Despite the order, Will remained firmly in place until Hannibal left through a smaller door on his end of the room before taking the seat on his own side, giving the neatly organized cutlery a mistrustful look. It wasn't long before the predator returned, and the tension in the atmosphere was re-strung. He seemed to notice it, pausing, taking in the feeling of the room and the way Will's eyes were following him before proceeding in with the dishes he was holding.

"A summer soup," he introduced. "I won't bore you with the details."
"Why not?" Will challenged, almost indignantly, keeping his eyes on the bridge of Hannibal's nose. Even as he did so, it was impossible to miss the smirk--this man sure smiled an awful lot, didn't he? He leaned closer than strictly necessary as he set one of the bowls down before his guest.

"You don't strike me as the type to appreciate it."

He lingered, giving Will a chance to decide that it was an insult while Hannibal's cologne was still thick in his nose, before retreating to his own seat.

"Smart move," Will bit out, glancing down at the food-network creation he'd been gifted.

"I didn't mean to insult you, Will. I simply meant that you don't seem like a man who would enjoy being harassed by the intricacies of the meal he is about to ingest before he is able to do so. Perhaps you might like to know that I made it myself, however."

"Chef, count, psychiatrist...the list goes on and on, doesn't it?"

"Indeed. I suspect there is more to you than there is to me, however--at least, you know a great deal more about me than I do about you. Would you care to level the playing field?" He raised a brow as he tucked his napkin into his collar. For a moment, Will considered the gesture pretentious, but hey--if his clothes were as expensive as Hannibal's probably were, he'd probably invest in a lobster-bib for all of his meals, so all the power to him.

"I'd have to say you're wrong."
"Oh?"
"There's nothing to me that you don't already know. Criminal Profiler. Mentally unstable. On the run. Good with plants."

"Were you a gardener, before you joined the FBI?" He made his inquisition while picking up his spoon, and Will sighed, mirroring the action with one of the two spoons before him, not caring whether it was the correct tool.

"When I was a teenager, I did yard work, but no. Before I joined the FBI, I was a professor at the FBI academy. And I--didn't really *join* the FBI. I was a consultant." He enunciated the word carefully and then tried his best to shovel in a spoonful of the orange-colored soup with even an ounce of grace. *Damn, that's fucking amazing*.

"A professor? I had thought you might have been an agent, before Agent Crawford discovered your gift."
"Gift?" Will snorted, unable not to. "Yeah, sure. No, I was deemed to unstable to be an agent. Didn't pass the tests. I finally gave up and retired to something I was deemed mentally capable of."

"And yet he summoned you anyways. Truly an interesting character. Determined."
"One-track," Will argued, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. "Broken record. I've been doing this for three years, everything he said today I've heard a million times before."

"Perhaps foolish, then, for thinking that the message is going to suddenly start sticking. Perhaps he should simply *get the message*?"
"Asking that of him would be too much, I think. He's never going to get anything, let alone the idea that I'm not useful to him, despite any preconceived abilities I may or may not have."

"No, I suppose that wouldn't do. Not when he's tracked you trans-continentally."

"You get it." He waved his free hand, flippantly. "Yours isn't the first place he's tracked me to. London, Paris, Berlin--he always figures it out. When he finds me, he comes, tries again. Hopes I'll feel fucked enough to let him twist my arm all the way back to the states."

"Have you considered returning home and simply brushing him off from the comfort of your own country?"

"Considered it? I'd give my left arm to be able to do that. Hard enough as it is."
"What is?"
"Saying no. He's not too far from the truth, when he acts like he's right on the cusp of breaking me open. Persuasive."

"If only you had a buffer, between you and dear Agent Crawford. Something to keep the wolves at bay."

"If only," Will parroted, somewhat sullenly. Silence persisted, save the sound of spoon against bone china, and Hannibal was quick to take the empties away, returning with two vibrant entrees in hand. After introducing Will to his steak, he poured a large glass of red wine that probably cost more than Will's house, and tilted his head in response to Will's raised brow.

"Sorry, I just thought all rich people had someone to pour their wine for them. And to cook"

Rather than taking this to heart, Hannibal seemed amused, and considered the slightly jeering statement for a moment. "I'm very careful about what I put into my body. I prefer to cook my own food, and allowing someone else to bring it to me seems a waste of presentation."

"Oh, I get it. You're an entertainer. Sorry for not being a receptive audience."
"No need to apologize. Showmanship can be tiring, at times. I only ever care that the food is enjoyed."

"The soup was pretty good," he admitted, begrudgingly. "I'm sure this is fine."

If Hannibal was dampened by the lackluster words incorporated into the mumbled praise, he didn't show it. Rather, he could tell that Will wasn't one to pass out praise, and took it as a genuine compliment. He decided that impressing Will Graham would be difficult. He always did like a challenge.

The profiler wasn't receptive to any further conversation or agitation, but Hannibal was content with the information he'd already gained. By the end of their dinner, which was decidedly short, he already knew exactly how he would be spending his time.

Hannibal was obscenely good at reading people--he knew most from sight alone, if not a bit of conversation. There was more to Will, however, that much was clear, and if every interaction they had was as delightful as their conversation in the study and dinner had been, he'd be a worthwhile distraction from boredom. He'd unravel the man before him, break him down to bits, use the pieces for his own amusement, and then put him towards a lavish dinner. Something simple in comparison, perhaps, elegant but straightforward. After all, when properly respected, even the most stubborn meat could make a feast. Hannibal would enjoy feasting, too--first upon the desecrated remains of Will's sanity, and then on whatever was left.

Mrs. Astrauskas was there to lead Will back to his bedroom, and Hannibal bid him a faux farewell--*a pleasure to of met you, Will. I wish you luck in your endeavors and your avoidance of Agent Crawford*--before retiring to his study. He had a few hours to relax and think things over before he would shed his skin and emerge a new, outfitted instead with a purpose. All he needed to do was consult is Rolodex, and then make use of Crawford's card.

The serial killer plaguing his small town had been quiet for years, gruesome crimes silenced, artful displays long in the past. Now, however, over two decades had passed--

It was time for the ripper to become active once more.

Cypress

Chapter Summary

> The cypress has long been revered as a symbol of death and mourning. Indeed, it remains the classical cemetery tree throughout Europe and the Muslim world. Classically, cypress was associated with death and the underworld due to the fact that, when pruned too severely, the trees wouldn't grow back.

There was something uncomfortably familiar about the scent of decay. Will was familiar with death--clinically, from the bodies in the morgue, and hands-on corpses, which he found out in the field and was instructed to poke at. He hadn't missed it.

He made eye contact with the corpse--a young man, statuesque features, lids pried open to expose cloudy corneas gone milky grey. Unseeing. Eyes left always open, incapable of providing insight to their host. He suppressed a shiver.

The body was split from throat to pelvis, a gaping cavity stuffed with fresh blooms. Not funeral flowers, no. *Rhododendron. Beware*. He was too tired for this.

The scent of death and the familiar sight of an artful display worked together with the sensation of being led by an important man to give him terrible disorienting deja vu. Jack Crawford was an important man. Throngs parted for him, gawkers scattered. Hannibal Lecter was, apparently, an important man. He had a similar effect.

"I was hoping, Will, that you would do me this favor. I have a great love for my hometown. I should hate to see it desecrated." The count had asked him oh-so-nicely, and over a freshly cooked breakfast. If there were any fibers in Will that knew how to refuse, the scissors of polite society cut them open. Since when did he care about polite society? He wasn't sure, but now he was standing in front of a fresh corpse. He wanted to crawl inside of his own brain and live in a pit of silence.

"Do you see anything, Will?" Hannibal's voice was gentle. He closed his eyes.

"I need to be alone with him," he muttered.

"With the corpse?"
"With the killer. Yes, by extension, the corpse."

Hannibal's importance swelled as he cleared the scene, taking his own respectful steps back. Will didn't need him gone, he was a small stone. When tossed into the river, one tiny rock could hardly disrupt the water. If the man's eyes were heavy on the back of his neck, it was

easy to ignore. The pendulum swung. He wasn't Will Graham, not anymore. He was a creature made of darkness and for darkness, a self-perpetuating cycle.

I find him by accident, completely on purpose. He was marked the moment he met me, and not a moment before. I bring him here, under false pretense. He is malleable, pliant--insignificant. I do not prolong his death. He is worth nothing to me alive.

His death creates a canvas, and I will paint my art upon him, while exacting my pound of flesh. They will see me, but they will not know me. They will not know what I have truly done.

When his eyes opened, they belonged to him again. Cerulean orbs, shaky breaths. "He's not new," he managed, clenching and unclenching his fists in a compulsive gesture. "This isn't the first time he's killed. Maybe not even the first time he's killed like this." He glanced back at the count, who was still watching him, maroon eyes sharp and keen. "Did he take anything?"

"Yes. The liver."

Will looked back at the corpse, and then shook his head. "You're dealing with a trained professional."

"I see. Do you still require the scene?"
"No."
"What do you require, then?"

Will made eye contact, only for a second, before looking up at the sky. Anywhere but that pointed, intent face. "I need all your criminal records for the past six decades. Not just the things you think are of note, *all* of it."

"Of course," the man obliges--naturally. He's a man in the best position to be obliging. Having so much makes you inclined to give the rabble small favors. Will tried to remind himself not to look to deeply at his host--he'd be in Lithuania for a while yet.

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"I left the country soon after he went inactive," Hannibal explained. "After a few months, the people seemed prepared. I had to resume medical school. A few plagiarisms cropped up in the years following, nothing significant. The locals called him *The Ripper*."

"The Ripper," Will tasted, feeling the sound of the name. Apt. Fitting. Flattering, to the monster itself. *Man,* he reminded himself, *just a man*. He had to keep repeating the message. If he forgot that the killer was just a man, he would have to become a monster, too, and he was far too tired to crack open that can of worms. "It's him."

"Is it? It's been nearly three decades. Surely he can't be the same. A copycat, perhaps?"
"No, it's The Ripper," Will nearly snapped, resting his fists on the solid mahogany desk.

"However he's done it, he has. He's come back. Maybe he never left, but he wants attention again. Someone's caught his eye."

"I see. Should we worry, for this person?"
"Yes, but not yet. They're safe as long as his interest is maintained. Your local P.D is working on the forensics, aren't they?"
"Correct. I've had some specialists brought in to work with you."
"I'm just consulting," he argued, even as he stared at one of the Ripper's earliest known victims. Impaled, in the traditional sense, bereft of a heart. Grossly symbolic. This was not a head he wanted to climb inside, and yet he was already wrist deep.

"Will he kill again?" Hannibal requested, earning a nod. After a moment, Will went on to say:

"Maybe not like this. But he will. The sooner the attention around this one fades, the sooner you'll find your next body."

"I see. I hope you will consider staying to consult further, then. I sense you will be invaluable. You will be, of course, my esteemed guest the entire time. Anything you should need--"
"I'll stay," he agreed, almost distractedly. "I escaped one monster only to find myself in bed with another."

"Who was the monster you escaped? Jack Crawford?"
"Jack Crawford has never been a monster, he's just a pushy man. The Ripper--I know his ilk."
"So this isn't new, for you?"
"It feels different. Banal."

"Pardon?"
"In his eyes, it's a recreation of something he captured years prior. He retook the picture and he's marketing it to a fresh audience. Reintroducing himself. This is a card trick. *Look what I can do, it gets worse. Watch, I'll show you*."

"He sounds rather petulant," Hannibal noted, earning a snort.

"He's a serial killer. In one way or another, they're all petulant."
"Do you think you can catch him?"
"Too early to tell. My track record suggests that I can." He looked up from the photos. "I need lab results."

"I'm sure they'll be ready by tomorrow."
"Too long. They must not be very good specialists." With that, he strolled towards the door.
"Where are you going, Will?"

"To your *forensics lab*. I want some answers."

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The lab was pristine, white, all sharp edges and hard corners. A well and true forensics lab. The corpse of one Nojus Saltis lay out, body cavity even more a twisted maw when removed of the delicate purple flowers, eyes still wide open. There were three people in the room with the body--a man, standing by a computer, an attractive woman with dusky skin, leaning by the man's computer, and a younger woman, who looked fresh from the cradle, using tweezers to pick through the flowers. All three looked at them as they entered, Will Graham trailed by a confirmed important man.

"You must be Special Agent Graham," the man at the computer noted, complete with a heavy French accent. The stubble on his face was trimmed, neat.

"Just Will," he corrected, eyes raking over the body. "You're all qualified?"

"Mr. Andrew Thomas, with a masters in forensics, Ms. Dorothy Smith, with a masters in criminology, and Dr. Evangeline Jones, specializing in forensic science. All are very skilled, I assure you."
"Right. Have you found anything?"

"He was killed quickly, mutilated post-mortem," the young doctor informed, still focused on her task. "He was only out overnight, couldn't have been longer than ten hours. The blood was drained prior, there's hardly any on the flowers."

"Speaking of the flowers," Andrew chimed in, "no DNA other than Mr. Saltis', and I'm sure that has a right to be there."

"How was the liver removed?"
"With surgical precision," Evangeline explained, voice clipped. "It was all very precise. Clean."

"Professional," Dorothy chimed in, "experienced."

"Obviously. How experienced, though?" Andrew challenged, earning an eye-roll. "A good question, no?"

"No," Will murmured. "Nothing on the flowers?"

"We checked for semen, DNA, foreign fibers--they're just flowers," Evangeline assured. "This is my fourth look."

"So we're back to profiling the unsub from a cold case from decades ago," Will summarized. "Keep looking."

"Oh, *will do*," Dorothy snarked, crossing her arms. "We were planning on stopping at poking it with a stick, but thanks for your recommendation, Agent Graham."

"He said Will," Evangeline corrected, setting down her tweezers and turning, pulling off her gloves with a snap. "Purposefully irritating important people does not a good career decision make, Agent Smith."

"Bite me, Doogie Howser."
"That was a compliment, thank you."

"Should I be worried that personal conflict will interfere with your jobs?" Hannibal requested, sharply. Evangeline turned, head tilted. Andrew looked down. Dorothy looked at the floor.

"It hasn't yet," she offered, earning a thin frown. "Dr. Lecter," she added, clearing her throat. "I'll do another analysis of the flowers, and check the cavity for anything interesting."

"I'll resample the fingernails," Andrew offered, "see if he fought his attacker."

"He didn't," Will muttered. "Nothing to fight. He didn't see it coming."

Hannibal assessed him for a moment before smiling, placing a light hand on the man's back. "Shall we go home for lunch, Will? I'm sure they will be sure to call you, should anything interesting come up."

"In a heartbeat," Dorothy muttered, earning herself a sharp look from Evangeline. Will was already miles away, and allowed himself to be led out by the count, who gave one last look to a staff that, somehow, clearly belonged to him.

End Notes

This is the Wendigo AU nobody asked for. Slow updates, you have been warned.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!